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L2 students' performance on listening comprehension items targeting local and global information

Anthony Becker

Colorado State University, Department of English, 359 Eddy Hall, Fort Collins, CO 80523-1773, USA

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ABSTRACT

Models of academic listening ability indicate that two skills are crucial, identifying factual information and making appropriate inferences (e.g., Aryadoust, Goh, & Kim, 2012; Rost, 2011). However, designing tasks that target students' ability to make inferences can be challenging. This challenge is particularly important for academic English programs (AEPs) where such skills are important for academic success, and therefore, are often included in proficiency tests used for placement/exit decisions. For this study, questions from an AEP listening test were categorized as assessing either local or global comprehension skills. Examinees' performance on these questions was analyzed to determine whether: 1) four proficiency groups (advanced, high, intermediate, and low) differed in their performance on questions targeting local (factual/detail) and global (inference-propositional and inference-pragmatic) listening comprehension, and 2) within-group differences existed in examinees' performance on the same questions. Examinees' scores for questions measuring local and global listening comprehension were compared using an ANCOVA test. While examinees' performance on the questions targeting local and global listening comprehension varied among the proficiency groups, scores revealed significant differences for listening skills within several of the proficiency groups. The findings raise important questions about the types of inference questions that should be included in L2 listening tests.

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1. Introduction

Listening is a fundamental skill for both first (L1) and second language (L2) learners and has received substantial attention in L2 assessment literature (e.g., Aryadoust, 2013; Buck, 2001; Field, 2008; Rost, 2011). Yet, listening remains the least examined skill in L2 assessment literature (Lynch, 2011; Vandergrift, 2007). Current models describe the complex nature of L2 listening comprehension as a series of cognitive processes undertaken to perceive and parse linguistic input, construct meaning, and interpret the message by establishing its relevance to the social context as well as determining its communicative function (Buck, 2001; Field, 2008; Rost, 2011). This understanding of the nature of L2 listening, however, does not translate to a single definition of a listening construct that would be accepted by the majority of L2 assessment specialists. Thus, when designing a listening test, it becomes the test developer's responsibility to define and operationalize the construct to ensure that an L2 listening test engages the intended cognitive processes and, therefore, is valid.

E-mail address: tony.becker@colostate.edu.

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Following the cognitive orientation in understanding L2 listening, one widely used proficiency test – the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) – served as a model for the listening test implemented in the present study. The TOEFL iBT operationalizes the L2 listening construct via a set of specific abilities which learners need to engage in order to complete procedures (i.e., tasks) to comprehend content (i.e., texts) in specific academic contexts. These abilities include: a) understanding main ideas and important details, b) understanding key vocabulary, c) understanding the communicative function of utterances, d) making inferences about relationships among ideas, e) integrating information with one's own knowledge, and f) integrating information from one or more texts (Chapelle, Enright, & Jamieson, 2008). As reflected in the operationalization, TOEFL assesses examinees' ability to engage with the content at both the local and global levels, as well as their ability to understand how a message should be interpreted in a specific context. This overall distinction between local and global levels of comprehension might be intuitive to some researchers and test developers. However, in the context of an academic English program (AEP), in which language instructors are often tasked with developing in-house listening tests, it is important to provide additional detail on how different task-types are related to the abilities being assessed in the listening test and if/how participants' proficiency level might relate to those abilities.

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which the questions from an in-house listening test that targeted comprehension of local (explicit, factual) and global (inferential) information differentiated between listeners with varying levels of L2 proficiency. Furthermore, the study also examined participants' within-group performance on these questions, hoping to provide further insights on the assessment of local and global listening comprehension. The following sections include a discussion of the current theoretical accounts of L2 listening ability, focusing specifically on the various types of cognitive processes involved in listening comprehension and how they informed the research questions asked in the present study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining listening comprehension

Listening is a complex mental process that is crucial for learning a language. In order to comprehend what they are hearing, a listener must be able to receive auditory signals (i.e., input) and break them up into linguistic units (morphemes, words), all the while retrieving the meaning of those linguistic units from their long-term memory. However, listening comprehension also involves the transformation of those acoustic signals into a meaningful interpretation that is matched against what the listener already knows (Buck, 2001; Rost, 2002). In this way, listening comprehension is viewed as an active process that involves the interaction of multiple underlying sub-processes.

Rost (2011) offers a more detailed account of listening comprehension by identifying the three larger levels of processing an acoustic signal – *linguistic, semantic*, and *pragmatic* – and then further specifying the sub-processes involved at each of those three levels. Specifically, *linguistic processing*, which is often referred to as bottom-up processing, encompasses speech perception, word recognition, and syntactic parsing at both the immediate sentence level and the more extended discourse level. This type of processing results in a decoded speech signal which is then related to the structures and concepts one has in the memory to achieve comprehension – the processes which take place during semantic processing. *Semantic processing* is an important step in comprehending a text, as it involves building, activating, and updating mental representations of the concepts that help a listener to interpret the decoded speech signal and to integrate incoming information with what is already known. The comprehended information is then stored in memory as a network of interrelated propositions which are accessed when information needs to be retrieved and/or new information is encoded. Finally, at the level of *pragmatic processing*, the listener is able to co-construct the speech event by (a) utilizing the social knowledge and understanding social expectations, (b) understanding the context in which the speech event is occurring, (c) evoking the speaker's intentions, and (d) connecting with the speaker through various types of strategies, such as back-channeling and understanding what a preferred response should be, to name a few. While Rost's (2011) account of listening comprehension reflects the processes typically exhibited in general, it does not necessarily reflect the nature of comprehension found in many academic listening situations.

2.2. Academic listening ability

Researchers who have investigated general academic listening have noted substantial differences between listening for ordinary conversational purposes and listening to academic lectures and talks. For example, listening for academic purposes often requires an individual to participate in a number of relevant tasks simultaneously (e.g., taking notes, reading slides, conversing with classmates), as the person listens to the input (e.g., an audio recording or a lecture). While similar tasks can be found in non-academic listening situations, the integration of these tasks is much more common in academic settings, leading some to suggest that listening for academic purposes might require a higher level of listening ability (see Ferris & Tagg, 1996). In addition, Flowerdew (1994) argued that listeners of academic discourse have to identify important information and rely on their background knowledge of the topic more heavily compared to those who are involved in an ordinary conversation. He contends that listening for academic purposes incorporates additional sub-skills that are not used to the same extent as when listening for general purposes. Therefore, when defining the construct of L2 academic listening ability,

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